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ABSTRACT

A review of the research and a case study of current practice in one large urban school district evaluate the decision-making process of including students with disabilities in systems of educational accountability and the identification and provision of suitable accommodations for such students. Issues in the inclusion of students with disabilities in such programs as the National Assessment of Educational Progress are raised. The accountability system incorporated in the Maryland School Performance Program and the accommodations identified to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities are briefly described. A multi-site embedded case study was used to evaluate six schools (five elementary and one middle) committed to a reform initiative in an urban Maryland school district. Interviews, observations, and document analysis were used. Results indicated that decision-making factors are critically linked to the commitment of the district and schools to create inclusive environments which result in shared responsibility and ownership of students with disabilities by both regular and special educators. Capacity building within schools appeared to be the essential component, with implications for professional development, curriculum development, school improvement plans, and utilizing accommodations that facilitate achievement of standards. (Contains 18 references.) (DB)

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Who's in...Who's out? How are Decisions made Regarding the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Systems of Accountability?

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Abstract

This paper reviews research related to the decision-making process of including students with disabilities in systems of accountability and the identification and provision of accommodations to such students. Utilizing qualitative research methodologies, this research included interviews, document reviews, and observations in six schools in an urban school district in the state of Maryland.

Results of this study indicate that decision-making factors are critically linked to the commitment of the district and schools to create inclusive environments which result in shared responsibility and ownership of students with disabilities by regular and special educators. Capacity building within schools appears to be the essential component with implications for professional development in the areas of aligning curriculum with new standards; developing, implementing, and evaluating school improvement plans; and utilizing accommodations that facilitate achievement of the standards.

Who's in...Who's out? How are Decisions made Regarding the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Systems of Accountability?

What skills do we expect young Americans to have when they complete their education? How do we assess those skills? How do we evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional services and programs that are training students to develop these skills and competencies? How can these programs be held accountable for the performance of their students?

These issues are at the crux of the educational restructuring movement sweeping through America. They are of equal significance to regular and special educators. Without a vision for all students and the means by which to hold educators and schools accountable for their services, our nation's educational systems will not be able to meet the needs of students so they can be a part of our nation's effort to lead the global society of the 21st century.

Current educational reform movement is driven, in large part, by the desire to hold schools accountable for students' attainment of specific educational standards. The commitment to accountability broadly embraces all students, regardless of their specific learning characteristics and has created a number of dilemmas for policymakers and educational program developers. Educators have endorsed higher, more challenging educational standards for students (e.g., mastery of advanced subject matter

and demonstration of complex problem-solving and knowledge syntheses). However, the rhetoric defining this new commitment to standards-based accountability raises a number of concerns for educators of students with disabilities, most notably those who have diverse learning styles or cognitive disabilities. Of increasing concern to special educators is the degree to which these students are included and provided accommodations within the new assessments and accompanying accountability systems.

The focus of this study was the practices of district and school personnel in a large urban district in the state of Maryland. In 1989, the state board of education implemented the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP). Intended to change curriculum and instruction in the schools, MSPP includes standards for students, school, and district performance; performance assessments; and provisions for reconstitution of low-achieving schools and financial rewards for improving schools. Implicit in the MSPP framework is the inclusion of all students which is facilitated through a wide-range of accommodations that are identified for each individual student during IEP development.

Competing pressures of high-stakes accountability with issues related to inclusion of all students have resulted in numerous conflicts in participation rates, accommodations, and reporting practices of students with disabilities. To date, the emphases of investigations and policymaking have been heavily focused on national and state-level policy with minimal attention

paid to local district and school policy and practice related to the decision making process of participation of students with disabilities in systems of accountability. This research fills this void by presenting a case study of current practice in a large, urban school district within a high stakes accountability statewide accountability system.

Standards, Assessment, and Accountability

The attention to assessment and student performance standards is not new. For the last two decades, states have been moving toward developing a systems approach to improving educational services and standards for students. By the mid 1980s, over 40 states had developed some type of systemic approach to evaluating educational standards (Kirst, 1990). These endeavors resulted in a variety of approaches to define and assess student standards. Some were oriented to specific domains (i.e., competencies in algebra, chemistry, foreign languages) while others were broadbased focusing on self-sufficiency, problem solving, and citizenship. Nonetheless, a common theme pervaded virtually every standards-based system developed by the states: an emphasis on assessing and improving student academic achievement as well as higher-level, critical thinking skills.

The vast majority of state models and federal initiatives have focused on students who quite reasonably may be expected to graduate from high school or develop high competency in academic areas. However, for students with disabilities, and in particular, those with severe disabilities, the relevancy of

these standards and accompanying assessments has increasingly been questioned (NCEO, 1991 & 1993).

Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, special education program accountability has rested with determining procedural compliance such as documenting whether or not a specific service was provided as required in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Efforts to document program effectiveness through examination of student educational performances were virtually nonexistent. However, in the mid 1980s the attention turned toward student standards.

This trend began with the publicity surrounding several early follow-up studies (e.g., Edgar, Levine, & Maddox, 1986; Hasazi, Gordon & Roe, 1985, and Mithaug, Horiuchi & Fanning, 1985). Studies such as these made special educators acutely aware that students with disabilities do not do well after school. A number of follow-up studies also documented the poor post-school performance of students who had received special education. Zigmond and Thornton (1985) and Edgar (1988) also have documented the high drop out rates for these students. Most recently, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) have supported the findings of the numerous earlier follow-up studies. The NLTS found that, nationally, students with disabilities drop out of school at a higher rate than their non-disabled peers and that only slightly more than half of the students who leave school do so via graduation. In addition, a national Harris Poll survey reported

that unemployment among persons with disabilities is a larger problem than among any other group of working-age Americans (Harris, 1986). Most continue to live at home, and few participate in any social or recreational activities.

Many special educators maintain the IEP should serve as the foundation of the accountability process with student progress measured against the IEP goals and objectives (Smith, 1990). Occasionally considered a tool for accountability, the IEP has been the mainstay in planning and evaluation of special education services. However, the very nature of the IEP only allows educators to gauge individual student progress toward individually designed goals and objectives (McLaughlin & Warren, 1992). Evaluation of the effectiveness of instructional programs beyond the individual student level is not possible. Furthermore, the IEP typically only relates to the special education or related services a student may receive and is not necessarily aligned with state identified student performance standards.

Publication of those studies caused educators, advocates, and policymakers to call for improved performance of students receiving special education services (Schrag, 1991). In 1989, the National Council on Disability stressed the need to look at how educational services are provided and the long-term impact they have for adults with disabilities. This calling was repeated in their 1993 report.

While America is investing significant resources in defining

and assessing student educational standards, there has been limited attention to how students with disabilities fit within the local district assessment programs. Students with disabilities who receive special education services are reported to be frequently exempted from the assessments and thus from the accountability systems based on those standards.

National large scale assessments (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP]) will include students with disabilities who participate in academic subjects 50% of the time and are deemed to be capable of meaningfully participating in the assessments. However, NAEP does not permit the use of any testing accommodations thus excluding large numbers of students from national data bases (Thurlow, 1995). Therefore, minimal data are currently available to assess the progress of students with disabilities and establish accountability for their overall educational program.

Not unlike their colleagues in other education fields, special educators are concerned over the lack of accountability for special education services provided students with disabilities (Coutinho & Malouf, 1993; McLaughlin & Warren, 1992). Results of national surveys on state (NCEO, 1991) and local (Warren, 1993) level accountability systems reflect minimal involvement of students with disabilities. This exclusion has significant ramifications for the education of students with disabilities: such exclusion can further the traditional practice of educators absolving themselves of responsibility for those

students whose progress they are not held accountable for. This, in turn, leads to lower expectations for student performance (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, McGrew, & Shriner, 1994) and the thinking "Out of sight...out of mind."

Maryland School Performance Program

The State of Maryland has been in the nation's forefront of developing a comprehensive accountability system. Responding to the public's calling for schools, school systems, and the State to be accountable for high levels of education and measurable results, the Governor's Commission on School Performance was formed. Based on the Commission's recommendations, the State Board of Education established the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP) in 1989 to move Maryland toward high quality education for all of its children.

By the year 2000, the MSPP is designed to provide each student the opportunity to graduate from public schools with increased information and skills needed to:

* participate in a world economy and job market that is more competitive than ever;
* function as a responsible citizen in a democratic society; and
* achieve a personally satisfying and fulfilling life.

The MSPP has developed a comprehensive accountability system which communicates results to the public through extensive use of school report cards (i.e., the Annual Maryland School Performance

Report). These report cards provide an overview of the student population characteristics (i.e., number of students receiving special education and Title I services), student participation rates (i.e., attendance, dropout rates), student attainment rates (i.e., student assessment scores and promotion rates), and student performance on standardized assessments.

Assessment of student performance within the MSPP is achieved through two criterion-referenced assessments: Maryland Functional Tests (MFTs) and Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). Four tests, based on 6th grade competency levels, comprise the MFT in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and citizenship. Students begin taking the tests in 7th grade and continue taking them until passage. The MSPAP was created to provide a mechanism for measuring the desired student standards in the areas of reading and writing, mathematics, social studies, and science. Assessment tasks are integrated across domains and include small group activities and individual analysis and writing. MSPAP tasks are administered to all students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 unless they are exempted from participation (i.e., due to disability or limited English proficiency).

A series of accommodations were identified to facilitate the participation of greater numbers of students with disabilities. Examples of test accommodations include varying scheduling, setting, presentation of test, student response, and equipment. Accommodations that would invalidate the results of the tests

(i.e., reading the "reading" test to the student) are not permitted. No accommodations may be made solely on the basis of a categorical handicapping condition. Rather, accommodations must be approved by each individual student's IEP team and are intended to be used during day-to-day instruction as well as testing.

Decisions regarding exemption from testing is made by each student's IEP team. Although the state has not placed any caps on the number of students who may be exempted, it is moving toward adopting a policy limiting exemptions to 2% of the special education enrollment in a school district.

Research Methodology

A multi-site embedded case study design was used for this qualitative research study. This particular approach was selected to accommodate the diversity of anticipated findings found within the schools of the targeted school district. The design enabled the researchers to study numerous sub-units of analysis (i.e., schools) within one unit of analysis (i.e., district) thus facilitating analysis of each site's (school's) findings as well as those of the larger case (district).

One of the dangers of multi-site embedded case study is a predominate focus on the sub-unit level and failure to return to the larger unit of analysis. Recognizing this danger, the research framework was designed around issues of systemic (district) interest related to decision making and student participation.

A large, urban school district in the state of Maryland was selected as the focus of this study for two reasons: 1.) the state's accountability system (MSPP) is nationally recognized as one of the most wide-sweeping systems that is resulting in instructional changes in the classroom; and 2.) competing pressures of urban schools complicate the efforts to restructure schools and classrooms so that all students are engaged in learning opportunities that result in achieving desired student standards.

The target district has committed to engaging in a systemic reform process that will include special education in its restructuring activities; a restructuring that will result in reducing separate structures within the schools both in terms of location of instruction as well as participation in assessments. This systemic restructuring initiative is a collaborative effort between the school district, state department of education, and University of Maryland at College Park.

Six schools within the district are participating in this reform initiative (five elementary and one middle school); each provides a wide range of special education supports. Not unlike many other districts, the special education student population in the buildings ranges from 7% to 22%. However, regardless of the range, an average of 58% of the students were (initially) educated in separate special education classrooms and over 45% of the students were exempted from participation in the MSPP assessments.

The research framework employed a variety of qualitative techniques including interviews, observations, and document analysis. Cross-cutting guiding questions and focus areas were identified through an iterative process. Actual construction was based on an analysis of critical issues in the study of student participation both within regular and special education systems. Interview protocol were developed to obtain descriptions of the district and school policies and practices regarding mission statements as related to the Maryland Learner Outcomes; student participation in assessments; selection and implementation of accommodations; and reporting and use of assessment results. Observation protocol were developed for school improvement team (SIT) meetings (e.g., process for developing and evaluating school improvement plans [SIP] relating to student assessment), IEP meetings (e.g., individual student determination regarding participation in assessments and identification of accommodations), and classrooms (e.g., implementation of accommodations during instruction and testing). Document review protocol were developed for school (e.g., SIPs, annual school reports, policies) and student (e.g., IEPs and test reports) documents. Pilot testing enabled evaluation of format usability and relevancy of content to the study's research questions.

The research implementation schedule was developed to allow sufficient time to interview key informants, review student records and IEPs, observe classroom implementation of accommodations during instruction and assessment, and conduct

follow-up interviews on the reporting and use of student assessment results. Within each of the six participating schools, a minimum of 10 individuals were interviewed including the principal, restructuring facilitator, ARD (IEP) manager, SIT chair, testing coordinator, school/consulting psychologist, two regular educators, and two special educators. Interviews at the district and state levels included individuals involved in curriculum and instruction, assessment and testing, and special education. Fifteen students from each of the six schools were selected for targeted analysis (i.e., IEP records review, classroom observation, and teacher interviews). Within each school, these students represented the range of students with disabilities (i.e., mild to severe, cognitive, and behavioral disabilities) in the assessment targeted grades (e.g., 3, 5, 7, and 8). Insight into the systemic issues involved in the decision making process of including students with disabilities was gained through observation of SIT meetings and analysis of school improvement plans (SIPs).

Findings of the Study

Synthesis of data collected during interviews, document reviews, and observations resulted in critical findings in four areas: school improvement plans; identifying students for participation in large-scale assessments; accommodations; and impact of the MSPP on students with disabilities.

School Improvement Plans

The 1995-96 school year was the second year of the

district's school-based management initiative called Enterprise Schools. The purpose for implementing this initiative was to allow schools increased flexibility to improve teaching and learning. This decentralization of management gave schools the autonomy and authority to manage educational and financial resources, and, to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship and reduce the size of the central office.

Within the Enterprise system, each school is required to have a school improvement team (SIT) that makes decisions about the operation of the school. The SIT, with the input from other appropriate school committees, develops a school improvement plan (SIP) for the school. The Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP) report is to be used by each SIT as a tool to analyze the school's performance and develop the SIP. The SIP is intended to provide direction and parameters for improved teaching, learning, and management.

A framework containing the essential long-term goals to be included in all SIPs has been developed by the district. One of the primary goals is improving student performance on the MSPAP and, for middle and high schools, the MFT. Each school's area superintendent is to review and approve the SIP and monitor the school's progress in meeting its goals.

As part of this research, the SIPs for each school were analyzed in three areas: 1) student performance relating to the MSPP; 2) performance of students with disabilities in the MSPP; and 3) professional development strategies focusing on improving

student performance. A review of the SIPs for the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years indicated that all six schools included a long-term goal to improve student performance. However, the target goal was typically very unrealistic (e.g., during the current school year, the school would progress from a performance rate of 5 - 20% [depending on testing domain] to meeting the state goal of 75% to earn the satisfactory rating). The 1994-95 SIPs did not include specific mention of students with disabilities. As a result of the Systemic Restructuring Initiative, each school's 1995-96 SIP included a focus on the performance of students with disabilities, either through expansion of the school-wide goal or development of a new goal specifically focusing on this population.

As part of the Enterprise School initiative, schools are to periodically evaluate progress toward the SIP goals. During the 1994-95 school year, three of the six schools used results of the CTBS and MFT to identify areas of student performance strengths and weaknesses. Through this analysis they discovered that many of their students with disabilities who were currently educated in separate classes scored no lower than their "low performing" students. This realization helped them to see that increased collaboration between regular and special educators could result in improved instruction for this larger group of students. As a result of this "success" in the three schools, the remaining three began similar analyses in the 1995-96 school year.

Each school's SIT also addressed professional development

needs and strategies to support the school in meeting its other SIP goals. Typically, the professional development was a disconnected array of speakers or events available on an ad hoc basis. There was minimal evidence of a systematic, sequential, professional development plan organized around the MSPP and school improvement within the schools.

Identifying Students for Participation in Large Scale Assessments

When MSPP was introduced in 1989, policymakers emphasized the inclusive nature of this state-wide accountability system: all students, regardless of location of residency throughout the state, were expected to meet the same educational standards (i.e., Maryland Learner Outcomes). With regard to inclusion of students with disabilities, the MSPP framework specified that:

> all students are to be included to the fullest extent possible in all statewide assessment programs. Accommodations are made to ensure valid assessment of a student's real achievement...The school ARD/IEP Committee should make or review accommodation decisions as part of the development or annual review of the IEP for students with disabilities; document the decisions; and include the accommodations in or with the IEP. Accommodations must be based upon individual needs and not upon a category of disability, level of instruction, environment, or other group characteristics. (Maryland state Department of Education, 1995, p. 2)

Who participates in the decision making process?

Participation in the Maryland Functional Tests (MFTs) has been a given for all students seeking a Maryland High School Diploma. Lack of passage in any of the four tests results in denial of a diploma. Therefore, all students with disabilities pursuing a diploma take the tests.

Since the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) is a high stakes test for schools and school districts rather than students, the dynamics are quite different. During the first four years of the MSPAP testing, the state department of education did not include exempted students with disabilities in the scoring equation nor did it monitor exemption rates. As a result, more than 50% of the students with disabilities did not participate in MSPAP assessments. Not until the state department announced it would monitor exemption rates beginning in 1996, did schools initiate activities that would prepare students for participation in MSPAP.

While state department representatives maintain the MSPP policy is clear regarding the participation of students with disabilities, school-based administrators maintain there is a lack of clarity. Throughout the interviews for this study, school personnel were asked how they determined who would participate in MSPAP. Staff in three of the six schools declared that they had been told in a meeting with state department administration that all students were to participate in MSPAP; no exclusions were permitted. Staff in the two schools with

students with autism and/or moderate to severe mental retardation exempted students based on their special education classification. Staff of the remaining school reported they began with the notion that all students should participate and then devoted a portion of each IEP meeting to discuss accommodations the target student would need to take the assessment; decisions were made to exempt a student only if numerous accommodations were identified that invalidate the assessment or made it too cumbersome to administer.

As noted above, the state policy emphasizes the role of the IEP team in determining whether a student will participate and what accommodations will support that participation. However, throughout the research interviews, school staff spoke of limited parent involvement in the decision making process; in fact parent involvement in the meetings is quite rare. Parents who do attend typically have limited knowledge of MSPAP and defer to members of the IEP team, in particular the IEP team manager. Yet several of the IEP team managers in the six schools shared that they have very limited practical knowledge about MSPAP, alignment with instruction, and strategies for implementation.

Which students participate in the assessments? Prior to 1995, it is estimated that over 50% of Maryland students with disabilities did not participate in MSPAP. Anticipating a change in state policy regarding exemptions, most schools (including the six in this study) included more students during the 1995 testing. For the upcoming 1996 administration, three of the six

schools have not exempted any students. Of the remaining three, one has exempted two students both with moderate mental retardation who attend the school due to parental desires for the children to attend their neighborhood school. In each of the two other schools, five students with autism and/or moderate to severe mental retardation have been exempted.

MSPAP testing policies permit excuses (i.e., allowing any [regular or special education] student experiencing undue difficulty to leave the testing environment) however, a score of zero is given to each excused student. Therefore, schools rarely use this option. During the 1995 administration, each school reported 3-5 excuses for reasons related to student refusal to participate in the assessment or causing undue disruption for the rest of the testing group. Although excuses must be reported to the district's central office, staff in each of the schools (including the Testing Coordinator) could not give exact figures and causes for the excuses. Recognizing the need to be proactive in preparing students for the testing experience and thus diminish the need for excuses, each of the schools has conducted at least one mock MSPAP testing session during the spring, 1996.

Accommodations

A series of five broad categories of accommodations have been developed by the state department to be used during MFT and MSPAP testing. They are accommodations to scheduling, setting, equipment, presentation of exam, and response of student.

Who identifies accommodations and how? As stated in the

MSPP policy, accommodations are to be identified on an individual basis by members of the target student's IEP team. In keeping with the concept of interdisciplinary planning, this IEP team should be comprised of the student, parent, teachers, and clinicians. Elementary and middle schools in the target school district typically do not include students in the IEP deliberations and they have significant difficulty obtaining participation of parents. Accommodations are identified and IEPs developed by a group of school-based staff. Following development, IEPs are sent home for parental signature.

School staff interviewed for this study expressed frustration in their responsibility to identify appropriate accommodations while lacking experience in MSPAP testing and instruction aligned with the Maryland Learner Outcomes. They stated that they lacked the technical knowledge to identify appropriate accommodations that did not invalidate the test.

What accommodations are selected? The state approved list of accommodations utilize a variety of different supports including technology (e.g., word processors, tape recorders, calculators), manpower (e.g., reading directions, recording student responses), and environmental (e.g., small group setting, separate setting, extended time, periodic breaks). A review of 15 IEPs in each of the six schools revealed a pattern for identifying similar accommodations (i.e., extended time, small group administration, repetition of directions). Other than the use of calculators and tape recorders, no technologically

oriented accommodations (e.g., word processors, spell checkers) were identified.

How are accommodations put into practice? MSPP policy states that accommodations are to be used during day-to-day instruction as well as during testing. As part of this research, 15 students were observed during classroom instruction, non-testing sessions. For those students receiving instruction in regular education classes, accommodations identified on their IEPs were not provided. Teachers explained that providing these would be too cumbersome in their classes (with many exceeding 40 students), they lacked the necessary support to provide accommodations (e.g., aides to read directions), and providing accommodations to some students would cause unrest among the non-supported students.

Students receiving instruction in separate settings tended to receive accommodations as a group. Typically the whole class would be given more time to complete a task than was given their non-disabled peers in the regular setting.

Regardless of instructional setting, accommodations during routine testing appeared to be consistent with those provided during instruction. Only during MFT and MSPAP testing was there evidence of individualized accommodations. As a result, the introduction of accommodations during the testing activity created unrest, confusion, and resentfulness in the classrooms. Frequently, staff identified to provide the accommodations were unfamiliar with the student and the accommodations. Recognizing

this as an issue in each of the six schools, staff decided to include special education students early in the mock MSPAP testing sessions. This provided students with increased opportunities to collaborate with their peers and teachers to implement and monitor accommodations.

When school staff were asked if the implementation of accommodations is monitored, the response was consistently positive. However, when asked to describe the monitoring system, staff reported there was not a "system", rather, staff walked around the room and made sure "everything looked ok". One teacher shared that her monitoring consisted of asking students how they were doing and if they were comfortable.

Barriers to increased use of accommodations. During the interviews for this study, respondents were asked to discuss barriers to increased use of accommodations. Three areas were identified: conflict between policy and practice; support from the district office; and capacity of school-based personnel.

School-based staff reported a conflict in policy versus practice. While the MSPP policy language is inclusive, minimal support is provided to schools to develop capacity to provide accommodations that will result in increased participation of students with disabilities. Interestingly, they see the conflict being between the state department and schools with minimal involvement of the local school district. As one Testing Coordinator noted, "the principal is between a rock and a hard place. The state has said test all (without really caring about

who 'all' is) and the principal has to deal with how to handle students who can't do it." When asked about the role of the local school district in this debate, the response was typically that if schools need something they could probably go to the central office and probably get it if staff had enough time and perseverance to figure out where to go.

Frequently, staff spoke of limited personnel available to support implementation. Schools that utilize accommodations involving manpower tended to have access to supplementary non-classroom based staff (e.g., Master Teacher, Consulting Teacher, Consulting Psychologist). However, such positions are not found in every school and thus result in unequal staff availability to provide supports. Another barrier was the lack of space available to convene additional testing groups. Access to equipment posed problems in implementing accommodations. Fear of having equipment disappear and not being available for MSPAP testing was frequently cited as a reason for not providing calculators to students for daily instruction. Staff report bureaucratic hassles when attempting to secure technology for student accommodations (word processors). They claim the district's procedures are deliberately cumbersome to dissuade IEP teams from identifying such accommodations.

Teacher knowledge about accommodations and the MSPAP testing process was raised as a critical barrier. As one teacher pointed out, "until you have lived MSPAP, you have no idea what it really is like. You can't have a proctor deliver accommodations and

administer the test when she doesn't know what is going on." On an instructional level, special educators have difficulty implementing accommodations to students receiving an academic curriculum because the teachers have minimal knowledge of the curricular scope and sequence, are not familiar with the Maryland Learner Outcomes, and have received minimal training related to MSPAP. Regular educators claim they have not received sufficient training to individualize instruction and use individual accommodations. Across the board, few teachers felt as though they had the skills necessary to use technological accommodations.

Impact of the MSPP on Students with Disabilities

Throughout this research, school, district, and state respondents were asked to reflect on the impact of the MSPP on instruction and student outcomes. Regardless of the "hat" that the individual wore, the response was typically positive. Most said that initially MSPP, and more specifically MSPAP, was viewed as a passing trend that created more hassles than benefits in the schools. Over the last three years, MSPP has come to be viewed as having a positive impact in the schools evidenced through instructional changes and increased collaboration among teachers. Particularly in the schools which have adopted a proactive approach to preparing for MSPAP, teachers report they have a new respect for the students' abilities to critically analyze and synthesize knowledge.

However, in most schools there remain a few staff who

question the need for a state-mandated standards-based accountability system that includes all students. As one teacher said, "the MFTs are based on the 'real world' which is 6th grade literacy and skills. Why do we need to impose more on our students who already have difficulty reaching the MFT standards? It is too frustrating for them and they just shut down...These are students who already have low self esteem and when they take MSPAP, it gets even lower." In a similar light, others say that the concept of MSPP (i.e., school accountability for all students as one cohort) goes against the philosophy of special education (i.e., to focus on each individual student and develop an instructional program for their individual needs).

Additional comments regarding impact tended to fall into three categories: impact on instruction; accommodations for all students; and implications for professional development.

Impact on instruction. Teachers report a significant change in the way they teach. As one teacher shared, "We had gotten into a groove...we would pass out dittoes and sit down...the class was good when it was quiet...now if my class is quiet I think their brains are asleep."

The Maryland Learner Outcomes not only focus on basic computational skills but also require students to be able to analyze and synthesize complex and diverse materials, and to write (across disciplines) for a variety of purposes (i.e., explain, persuade, justify). Traditional textbooks and educational resources aren't useful in the new classrooms.

However, due to budgetary constraints and a limited (albeit growing) market for this instructional material, teachers are being creative with the resources they have readily available. Students are more active in their learning. Increasing numbers of students are participating in performance tasks rather than end-of-unit chapter tests. School schedules are changing to accommodate longer periods necessary for performance-based activities. Even at the elementary level, teachers are seeing the value in 60 - 90 minute blocks of instruction; but they're also seeing they can not use traditional methods of teaching or students will become disruptive or lethargic.

Schools experiencing an increase in student scores on the MSPAP feel that proactive planning and work are critical. Although MSPAP is administered only to 3, 5, and 8th graders, successful schools are including all students and teachers in preparatory activities. Pre-kindergarten teachers attend MSPAP training sessions and are encouraged to have students "write" stories through pictures and sight words. Older students are taught to use scoring rubrics and evaluate their personal work and those of their peers. Mock MSPAP days are held school-wide so that the school culture becomes one of valuing the concept of critical thinking, collaboration, and performance assessment. No longer is the focus solely on the MSPAP grades; rather, pre-kindergarten through second need to provide the foundation for successful 3rd grade performance and so on.

Traditionally, special education classes were located on

their own teams in each of the six schools. Recognizing the need for special education students and teachers to collaborate and have access to the instruction necessary for successful participation in MSPAP, most schools have disbanded the special education team and placed the students and teachers on grade level teams. Although special education classes have been retained for support, the system is designed to encourage collaboration on a regular basis.

These activities have resulted in teachers seeing the need to align their curriculum with the Maryland Learner Outcomes. For middle school teachers, this requires teachers to be computer literate for the middle school curriculum which is only available via computer.

Accommodations for all students. Although state policy emphasizes the participation of all students in MSPAP, teachers and principals feel that accommodations enhance the participation of students with disabilities. Yet, many recognize that their practices in the identification and implementation of accommodations limit the potential impact on the students. One teacher said, "we just aren't that creative yet. So much has been thrown on us all at once with MSPAP. If a student is in 8th grade and reads at the 3rd grade level, I just don't know what accommodation I can use to support him...but maybe if that student had had MSPAP starting in 1st grade, he wouldn't have the problems he has now."

Students not receiving special education services are also

benefitting from the use of accommodations. With an increased focus on recognizing individual styles of learning, teachers are reporting the use of "special education" accommodations with their non-identified students during instructional activities. This raises an issue during large-scale assessments due to the prohibition of accommodations for nondisabled students. As one Testing Coordinator reported, "we 'give' accommodations to regular students all year...then suddenly they are on their own during testing. It's not fair."

Exploring the possibility of accommodations for all students is undergoing increasing debate in the district and state. As one teacher said, "we may have another Albert Einstein in our classes...but if we don't support his individual styles, he'll probably not make it through our schools today."

Implications for professional development. While the state policy makes it clear that the MSPP is for all students throughout the state, it appears as though successful implementation of the system is dependent on local ownership of the students. In each school, what provisions are made to ensure that all personnel possess the skills necessary to support students in reaching the established standards? Throughout the interviews for this study, staff capacity appeared as a critical component, if not the most important. Personnel need access to training coupled with ongoing technical assistance in several areas. Mentioned most often were those related to developing, implementing, and evaluating SIPs; adapting (special education)

instruction to ensure alignment with the Maryland Learner Outcomes; and utilizing accommodations that facilitate achievement of the standards.

Study participants report scarcity of two resources to bring about effective professional development opportunities: time and funding. Schools that are making progress in this area are being creative by identifying ongoing teacher release sessions that focus on collaboration around performance-based activities. Teachers are holding themselves accountable for regularly convening interdisciplinary (including special education) sessions where they critique activities related to the Maryland Learner Outcomes. In these cases, the school culture has changed to value professional development that is directly linked to the School Improvement Plan and the long-range goals associated with improving the performance of all students.

Conclusion

Early into the research, it became evident that the study of decision making of "who's in...who's out" of the MSPP accountability system is critically linked to the commitment of the district and schools to create inclusive environments - not necessarily full inclusion classrooms but schools that take responsibility and ownership for all their students. Study findings have supported initial observations that the MSPP standards-based reform has contributed to a shift in perspectives within schools from process orientation to performance of students including those with disabilities.

While the state policy is clear that MSPP is designed for "all" students, the state is just now developing a system of reporting exemptions and initiating sanctions for districts and schools exempting excessive numbers of students. As a result, there is little incentive to include students with disabilities (and risk lower scores which could result in sanctions) other than a commitment to all students. Although decisions regarding exemptions and/or use of accommodations are left up to the individual IEP teams, the message conveyed to faculty by the principal has tremendous impact on the decision-making process.

Since the state has recognized the problem of increasing exemptions, it has begun to place more pressure on districts to include all students in the assessments; thus resulting in a greater focus on the actual curriculum and instruction provided students in special education, particularly those in self-contained classrooms. Throughout the interviews, educators and administrators emphasized the need for collaboration to bring about these instructional improvements; however, while administrators would push for a "collaborative" environment, educators were reluctant to "give up their turf." When students were included in assessments, the identification and use of accommodations were not individualized. Special educators lack the skills necessary for students to acquire the requisite content knowledge. Regular educators lack familiarity with adaptations and accommodations. Both lack access manpower and technological skills to implement the accommodations.

Improved student performance results from a clear alignment between the local curriculum and the assessments. Teachers and administrators in this district are just now beginning to acknowledge the need for such alignment. Although teachers frequently attempted to use the state assessment results to make immediate instructional decisions, they were not successful because the tests were not designed for this purpose. Rather, they were designed to enhance curriculum and classroom instruction that would lead, in turn, toward improved individual student performance.

A desire for inclusion of all students is not sufficient in this era of sanctions for low performing schools. Rather, schools and districts need to have a framework for analyzing their decision making process and subsequently identifying the policy and resource needs to bring about a system that is accountable for all its students. Results of this study can provide such a framework.

The 1990s are marking a new era for the United States. No longer can we view the success of our society and economy in isolation from how we educate and prepare our youth for adulthood. There is an integral relationship between effective education and one's ability to work in a diverse, global society while contributing to one's community.

To accomplish this goal, systemic change must occur to ensure that schools and school districts share a sense of ownership for all students and that all students are included in

accountability systems. Areas of focus need to include approaches for ensuring educational standards are meaningful for all students; acknowledgement of the value of unique standards for some students with disabilities; incorporation of accommodations and modifications necessary to include students with diverse learning styles in the mainstream education assessments; inclusion of all assessment results in school and district level reports; and development of rewards and sanctions for educational programs supporting these students.

Each of these areas are essential components of an accountability system. Lacking any one of these components will result in the continued exclusion of students with disabilities from accountability systems. Special educators need to join their fellow educators policy makers, and community leaders in these efforts. Throughout this process, explicit focus should be maintained on the ability of all students to participate in the assessments, an acknowledgement of those areas where assessments are not appropriate for all students, and development of alternative assessments as appropriate.

Increasingly, our vision for our communities is one that includes individuals with diverse strengths as well as needs for support - a vision where interdependency works to strengthen our communities. Education plays a critical role in making this work. However, it is essential that the educational system be available to all students and that the system be held accountable for the growth of our youth.

The United States is in a time of great change, with significant changes to come. The challenge for today's educators and community leaders is to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have equal access to all aspects of our educational system and that the system shares equal responsibility for the growth of all our youth.

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